

Manual Of The Medical Department, U.S. Navy

Chapter 17, Paragraph 18

AUTOPSIES

(1) When a member of the uniformed services on active duty or active duty for training dies aboard a naval ship, at a naval station, in a naval aircraft, or outside the jurisdiction of local health authorities of the United States, and (a) death occurs under unnatural or suspicious circumstances, (b) there is reason to believe that the cause of death might constitute a menace to the public health, (c) the cause of death is unknown, or (d) death occurs while serving as an aircrew member of a military aircraft, the commanding officer having custody of the remains may authorize the performance of an autopsy to determine the cause of death or to complete military records. The commanding officer will normally be guided in this matter by the recommendation of an investigating officer or other fact-finding body or medical officer.

(2) Except as set forth in subarticle (1) above, autopsies may be performed only with the consent of the person or persons having the right of custody of the remains for burial or upon request of the local coroner or medical examiner. When authorization for an autopsy is required, such authorization shall normally be obtained on Standard Form 523 (Authorization for Post Mortem Examination). However, when the person having the authority to authorize an autopsy is not locally available, other documentary evidence of the authorization may be used in lieu of the SF-523; ie, Western Union telegram, letter, etc.

(3) When death of active duty military personnel occurs under any of the circumstances enumerated in subarticle (1) above, and an autopsy is authorized by the commanding officer and in other cases in which authorization from proper authority has been obtained, the appointed investigative officer, or other fact-finding body, shall provide the medical officer designated to conduct the autopsy with a detailed preliminary report of circumstances surrounding the death. In those cases in which authorization for autopsy has been granted by other than the commanding officer, the medical officer shall be responsible for advising command authority that such authorization has been granted so as to facilitate the expedient preparation of the preliminary investigation and report of the same to the pathologist conducting the autopsy. Upon completion of the autopsy, the pathologist, or medical officer conducting the autopsy, shall provide the investigating officer, or other fact-finding body, with a copy of the preliminary autopsy findings as to the cause of death, and when completed, a copy of the final protocol. The investigating officer, or other fact-finding body, shall provide the medical officer conducting the autopsy with a copy of the final investigative report.

(4) Whenever an autopsy is performed it shall be done promptly and with a minimum of disfiguration. The expeditious release of remains for preparation, encasement, and shipment to next of kin is of utmost importance. All autopsies shall be reported on Standard Form 503 (Autopsy Protocol) and a copy thereof shall be attached to the original of the NAVMED-N which is forwarded to BUMED.